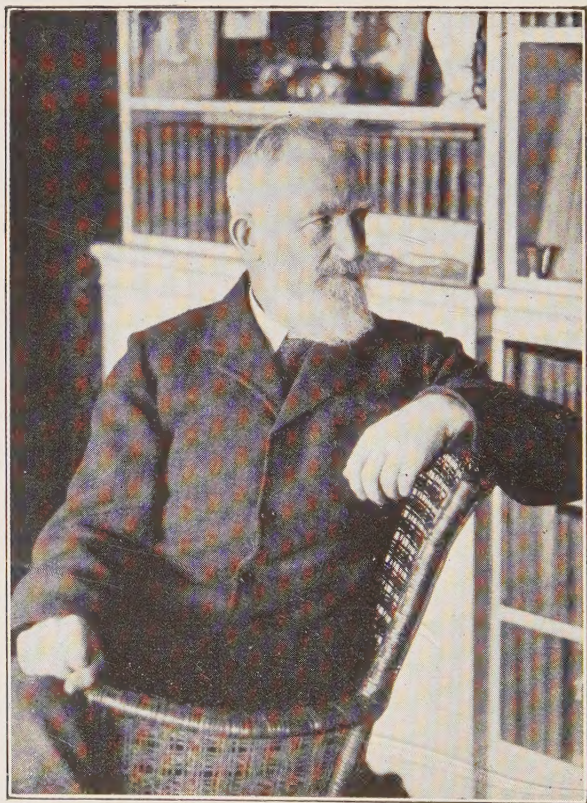




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BERNARD SHAW

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By
EDWARD SHANKS



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An excellent brief study of Shaw as novelist, critic, dramatist, writer of prefaces and philosopher. The author, a well-known English critic, is just and acute in his critical analysis and evaluation, freely acknowledging his faults as well as his claims to greatness. Useful in the small library. Bibliography.

B Shaw, George Bernard

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PREFACE

TO write a book on Mr Shaw is to commit a not even original outrage.

There are many works on his work, and most of these, at one time or another, I have read. But, since I undertook the writing of the present essay, I have kept clear of all of them with one exception. The one exception is Mr Archibald Henderson's *George Bernard Shaw: His Life and Work*; and I wish to express my deep indebtedness to this book, which no critic of Mr Shaw, for ever and ever, can possibly dispense with.

E. S.

RODMELL, SUSSEX,
1923.



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I

“G.B.S.”

A VISITOR to any new production given by the Phoenix or the Stage Society is very unlucky if he does not see, erect in his place during the interval, scanning the members of the audience and ready to be scanned by them, a tall old gentleman with a white beard and alert, but mild and benevolent, eyes. This is one of the great figures of our time: this is Mr George Bernard Shaw.

Fortunately he looks as impressive as he should, though impressive in an altogether unexpected way. Where are the red beard, the Mephistophelian eyes, the fighting aspect, with which all the caricaturists have so long familiarised us? They are not here. Friends and enemies alike must see instead something almost of patriarchal grandeur, neither the stormy petrel of any dispute

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which promises a good storm nor yet the mountebank eternally balanced on his head, but a figure requiring respect instead of anger or ridicule. Time was when Mr Shaw received plenty of both and gave as good as he got. But time has worked on him and on his work and on the appreciation of his work ; and there is something not a little symbolic in the physical change which has washed the angry colour out of his beard and left it as white, almost, as snow.

If our posterity, some seventy or a hundred years hence, should decide that there was nothing written by Mr Shaw which was worth reprinting, yet even that peculiar generation would admit the probable value of a work to be called *George Bernard Shaw and His Times*. Mr Shaw was born in Dublin, on the 26th of July 1856, and he was thus in his forty-fifth year and in the enjoyment of full maturity when the strange and distinctive final era of Queen Victoria's reign came to an end. He himself has said that : " A thorough

biography of any man who is up to the chin in the life of his time, as I have been, is worth writing as a historical document.” Up to the chin in the life of his time ! Certainly Mr Shaw was that ; or, at least, in a good half of the life of his time—and the new, unexpected and adventurous half.

And, it is fitting here to observe, it was in the last decade of the last century (Mr Shaw’s real *floruit* as a public character) that the word “ New ” suddenly took on an enormous and electric significance. There was the New Woman, and the New Journalism, the new art of photography, and the new sport of bicycling. Everything was being fashioned afresh in anticipation of the new century which was about to break on the world, and incidentally the new decadents were vigorously advocating what they believed to be new forms of art in honour of the demise of the old century. (Everything was so intermingled that Mr Shaw, the apostle of photography and the bicycle and the interpretation of *The Ring* as an

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allegory of Capital and Labour, actually contributed an essay to *The Savoy*, the organ of Aubrey Beardsley and Mr Arthur Symons.)

Amid all these new things Mr Shaw was very busy fashioning for himself a reputation of an entirely new sort. Like most men who seem brilliantly and independently original to their immediate contemporaries, he cut a figure in public which was very much the product of his time. We see what we expect to see, and in the mental picture we make of the world in which we live we are very apt to be some ten years or more behind the facts. The men of the nineties, even the most alert and enterprising of them, seemed to themselves to be living in a world which actually was no longer there, a world very like the world of the eighties. This was an age when Browning and Tennyson were still alive and Gladstone in the last full tide of his greatness; and in such an age Mr Shaw would indeed have been an eccentric and irrational phenomenon. But

the new things of the nineties, among which he was one, all worked together much too well for them to have been anything but genuine births of the Time Spirit. Could Mr Shaw ever have created the legend of “ G.B.S.,” at which he laboured so long and of which he was so very proud, without the help of the New Journalism ? It is very much to be doubted. He was, as he observed, a New Journalist himself. Now the New Journalism was wholly conditioned by the New Reading Public, which was in its turn brought into being by the New System of Popular Education ; and the New Reading Public turned out to be rather unexpectedly exacting in its ideas of what it was going to read. It demanded an unmistakable indication in the very first sentence that it was going to be amused ; and, if this was withheld from it, it inexorably left the article and went on to another. Mr Shaw at once developed this trick to a nicety, though it is not to be supposed that he really addressed himself to the New Reading Public. That

body, with a brusque democratic directness, succeeded in obtaining for the older literary classes what they had always wanted without knowing it. To their intelligences and desires Mr Shaw addressed his opening sentences, which are frequently models of what such things ought to be.

“ I have lived to see *The Colleen Bawn* with real water in it ; and perhaps I shall live to see it some day with real Irishmen in it, though I doubt if that will heighten its popularity much.”

“ No truly magnanimous soul ever indulges in the mean triumph of ‘ I told you so.’ Exhibitions of magnanimity, however, are not the business of a critic any more than of a general in the field : for to both alike the pursuit is as important as the victory, though it may be a barbarous, murderous, demoralising cavalry business of cutting down helpless fugitives.”

“ The world being yet little better than a mischievous schoolboy, I am afraid it

cannot be denied that *Punch and Judy* holds the field still as the most popular of dramatic entertainments. And of all its versions, except those which are quite above the head of the man in the street, Shakespeare's *Richard III.* is the best.”

Often (and perhaps best) his first sentence in these critical articles is a short and packed but lucid summary of the work under review, conveying in its tone a foretaste of the coming judgment.

Now these first sentences are quoted here not as examples of style or wit, but as examples of a journalistic method which was not peculiar to Mr Shaw, but which was extensively practised and brought to perfection by Mr T. P. O'Connor's other young men on *The Star* and later by Mr Alfred Harmsworth's young men on *The Evening News*. And the New Journalism meant a good deal more than this to Mr Shaw in the beginnings of his career; for he was not only a very capable practitioner of it, he was also precisely the kind of subject in

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which it delighted. He and his colleagues found it easy enough to interest their public in a figure who so willingly provided material so excellent. Hence, at an earlier stage than it happens with most writers, he, as they say in Fleet Street, "was news." Hence there came into existence "G.B.S.," that very typical figure of the nineties.

I have laboured this argument a little in order to sustain my point that, in looking for the origins of Mr Shaw's career, it is more important to remember that he began to flourish in the nineties than to remember that he was born in Ireland. But he was born in Ireland, and no reader of him or writer on him ever fails to remember the fact.

"I am a typical Irishman," he has said somewhere; "my family comes from Hampshire." This sounds like an idle joke, but in Mr Shaw's mouth it is the expression of a sincere conviction. He believes that racial characteristics do not endure long in the blood, but are modified by physical

environment or, perhaps he would say now, by the desire of the germ-plasm to accord with its environment. He says, in a note to *Cæsar and Cleopatra*, that “ the unadulterated Briton who fought Cæsar . . . impressed Roman observers much as we should expect the ancestors of Mr Podsnap to impress the cultivated Italians of their time,” because the character of the unadulterated Briton is a product of climate, not of race. One of Larry Doyle’s remarks in *John Bull’s Other Island* is even more to the point here :

“ Do you suppose a man need be a Celt to feel melancholy in Rosscullen ? Why, man, Ireland was peopled just as England was ; and its breed was crossed by just the same invaders. . . . If all my Irish blood were poured into your veins, you wouldn’t turn a hair of your constitution and character. Go and marry the most English English-woman you can find and then bring up your son in Rosscullen, and that son’s character will be so like mine and so unlike yours

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that everybody will accuse me of being his father."

If this were indeed so, then we should have to take very serious notice of the facts that Mr Shaw was born in Ireland and lived there until he was twenty and that all his ancestors married Irishwomen as far back as Captain William Shaw, who left his native Hampshire in 1689. But his Irishness seems to me, at least, to be no very great matter.

Perhaps I could better elucidate it if I could see in him any special quality uniting him with any other distinguished Irishman. Are we to say that he exhibits the same dream mysticism as the Duke of Wellington? He has a mystical strain in him, to be sure ; but he is neither a mystic like A.E. nor a dreamer like Mr W. B. Yeats. Are we to say that he is as volatile and irresponsible as the late Lords Roberts and Kitchener? He has not even the irresponsibility of Wilde or Sheridan. It is true that he, like them,

is brilliant and, like them, has written comedies. But his brilliance is different in kind from theirs and his comedies have been written to different ends. It has occasionally suited him to remind his readers of his Irish birth ; but an advanced writer in the nineties did not really need to claim alien blood before despising the English public, any more than he needed to do so in 1914 before criticising the official English case against Germany.

No ; in probably only one particular was the precise place of his birth and bringing-up of any importance to him. Perhaps nowhere in the world are futile gentility and respectability more obvious to be seen than among Irish Protestants ; and his early years have left him with a hatred of futile gentility and respectability which is among his strongest passions.

“ Protestantism [he says] in Ireland is not a religion ; it is a side in political faction, a class prejudice, a conviction that Roman

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Catholics are socially inferior persons who will go to hell when they die, and leave Heaven in the exclusive possession of ladies and gentlemen. In my childhood I was sent every Sunday to a Sunday school where genteel children repeated texts, and were rewarded with little cards inscribed with other texts. After an hour of this, we were marched into the adjoining church, to fidget there until our neighbours must have wished the service over as heartily as we did. I suffered this, not for my salvation, but because my father's respectability demanded it."

The result of this atmosphere was not only to induce a hatred of respectability, but also to inspire in a naturally religious mind the belief that religion was more or less contemptible. Probably, but for this warping, Mr Shaw's career might have been different and the philosophy he now holds might have been made plain to him earlier. But circumstances very similar, though not so acute, might be imagined in almost any

part of the British Isles. For his fiercest outburst against mere respectability (*Fanny's First Play*) he chose a London suburb as the scene.

His family was certainly such as might have existed anywhere. Mr Chesterton has somewhere said that the family of the Brownings, but for the accident of a genius being born into it, would certainly have continued on a gentle, upward slope of prosperity, whereas the family of the Dickenses, but for that accident, would have continued on a more rapid, downward slope. Perhaps some perception of analogy has strengthened Mr Shaw's affection for Charles Dickens, whom he quotes more often than any English author except Shakespeare. George Carr Shaw was a mild, attenuated, rather uninteresting version of Mr Micawber, who was not even thoroughgoing enough to reduce his family to the misery into which the Dickens family was plunged. Mr Shaw's blacking factory was the office of an Irish land agent, which he entered at the age of

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fifteen and where he remained for nearly five years, discharging his routine duties with great accuracy and thus exhibiting the not uncommon phenomenon of a son's reaction from the characteristics he has observed with dislike in his father.

In 1876 he abandoned the land office and went to London, where his mother had gone some years before, tired of her husband's dreary and half-hearted struggle for existence and determined to earn a living as a teacher of singing. Lucinda Shaw was a woman of character, energy and something approaching genius, who made up for her husband's spinelessness by acting as the assistant of an enterprising and able musician, George John Vandaleur Lee. To this influence Mr Shaw's early knowledge of, and interest in, music must be ascribed ; and I may as well record here my suspicion that, but for the accident of his mother's association with Lee, he would never have possessed either. At any rate, *The Perfect Wagnerite* does not seem to me to have been

written by a man with an inherently musical nature.

In London, according to his own confession, he set up as a professional man of genius, sought about for the proper vehicle for his genius, wrote novels which no one would publish, and lived on his mother. In the early eighties he proceeded by way of the doctrines of Henry George to socialism and in 1884 joined the not long constituted Fabian Society. Thereafter he flung himself into political propaganda, resolutely teaching himself the art of public speaking in the school of the debating society and the street corner—an education which has undoubtedly left a permanent mark on his style.

All this was excellent preparation for the appearance of “ G.B.S.” as a public character, and the chrysalis of “ G.B.S.” was “ Corno di Basseto,” the musical critic of *The Star*, which began to appear, under the editorship of Mr T. P. O’Connor, in 1888. The musical critic of *The Star* wrote often

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about music, generally about himself too, and always well. Presently he transferred his criticism to *The World*, where he used his own initials, and thus "G.B.S." was born. In 1892 his first play, *Widowers' Houses*, was produced by the Independent Theatre. In 1895 Mr Frank Harris offered him the post of dramatic critic on *The Saturday Review*, which he accepted, and retained until 1898. It was during this period that his initials first acquired their formidable power and began to be indissolubly associated in the public mind with those terrifying and fascinating qualities which he himself untiringly attributed to them. "G.B.S." was now fairly launched.

This figure is the proper subject of a study which cannot yet be written ; but certain remarks on it may be ventured. "G.B.S." had, as they say, no use for "good taste," no more use than so many of his characters have had for conventional morality. He was determined to be a public figure, and he concluded that, if no one else would

direct the public to admire him, he must set about the work himself. In this purpose he could hardly have succeeded if his apparent conceit had really been blind complacency and self-satisfaction. There is much truth in his own declaration that “ I am congenitally an extremely modest man. Shyness is the form my vanity and self-consciousness take by nature.” But he did deliberately impose himself on the English public, and, by warning them in advance that he intended to hypnotise them into a belief in his brilliance, he puzzled them, left them at a loss what to believe, but fixed their attention upon himself. Certain rather farcical methods of self-advertisement he dropped as soon as they ceased to be necessary. Thus it is not likely that he would, long after 1895, have used the expressions contained in a letter written by him to a newspaper in that year :

“ The book, which is a work of great merit, even for me, is called *The Perfect Wagnerite*.

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. . . It is a "G. B." eSsence of modern Anarchism, or Neo-Protestantism."

But, while he gave up this sort of clowning fairly early, he retained, and retains, all the more amiable and gracious forms of self-appreciation. He laughs at himself for saying that he is a great man, and at you for believing him, so infectiously that not many can resist laughing with him rather than at him. And on the result of the process he reports in his valedictory article in *The Saturday Review* :

"The English do not know what to think until they are coached, laboriously and insistently for years, in the proper and becoming opinion. For ten years past, with an unprecedented pertinacity and obstinacy, I have been dinning into the public head that I am an extraordinarily witty, brilliant, and clever man. That is now part of the public opinion of England ; and no power in heaven or on earth will ever change it. I may dodder and dote ; I may potboil and

platitudinise ; I may become the butt and chopping-block of all the bright, original spirits of the rising generation ; but my reputation shall not suffer : it is built up fast and solid, like Shakespeare's, on an impregnable basis of dogmatic reiteration.”

This report is not, of course, perfectly accurate. The amount of dogmatic reiteration achievable by one man is necessarily limited, and Mr Shaw's assertion that he by himself was quite capable of bull-dosing the English public into worshipping him must have led many of the more adventurous spirits in criticism, who might have been of service to him, to attempt sporting forlorn hopes on what he so often assured them was the losing side. Critics are not wholly logical persons. They, like others, have sporting instincts. They have also reputations to make ; and a young man can bring himself more into notice in opposition than from a considerable distance behind the Treasury bench. Therefore Mr Shaw

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became a "butt and chopping-block" much sooner than usually happens and before the English public had got thoroughly into the habit of repeating that he was a great man. There was a danger some two or three years ago, averted by the production of *Heartbreak House* and the publication of *Back to Methuselah*, that he might fall temporarily into the limbo of reputations of which people have grown tired. This would have been a pity, as every aberration of educated taste is a pity. The danger, I say, was averted; but Mr Shaw's reputation has yet many vicissitudes to traverse, in which his efforts cannot help it.

His early efforts had something of the effect of forcing, but they did produce a very fine bloom. Probably at no other time could they have done what they did. Into a world agog for new things, and with the New Journalism in full blast to supply them, "G.B.S.," critic, dramatist, wit, political agitator, general iconoclast and public buffoon, sprang across the sunset light of the

fading century, which made him seem un-really wicked and strange, sprang upwards like a pantomime demon out of a trap-door. Some persons ignorantly adulated him. Some (to whom his warmest gratitude, no doubt, was given) solemnly condemned him. But the majority regarded him as a company of adults regard a precociously clever boy. The youngster breaks all the rules of decent social intercourse, he interrupts when others are speaking, he contradicts more experienced persons, he talks too much and he talks too loud. But—now and again he says a confoundedly clever thing and—you cannot help listening to what he says.

II

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THERE is little need to say much here on Mr Shaw's novels. There are five of them; but one of them, named, as its author says, "with merciless fitness," *Immaturity*, remains to this day in the obscurity to which it was unanimously condemned by the publishers who first "had the opportunity" of considering it. Part of the manuscript, we are informed, has now been devoured by mice, but even the mice would not persevere to the end. This work, it may safely be taken, will never be printed. The remainder appeared as serials in *To-Day* and *Our Corner*, two not very successful socialist magazines. The last-written story, *An Unsocial Socialist*, came first, then its immediate predecessor, *Cashel Byron's Profession*, then the second novel, *The Irrational Knot*, and, lastly, *Love Among the Artists*.

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But before *An Unsocial Socialist* began to be printed Mr Shaw's career as a novelist, which had endured for some seven years, was already at an end. He has called them "Novels of My Nonage," and now seems to regard them with a good-humoured contempt, modified with a certain pride that such an inexperienced young fool as he then was could have written anything so good. Inexperience is evident in all of them, even in small material details. He himself has laughed at his own ignorance in giving Lydia Carew a magnificent park of thirty acres. And the Earl of Carbury is curiously referred to by his acquaintances as Lord Jasper, while his sister is Lady Constance Carbury and "the fourth son of a younger brother of the Earl of Carbury" is known as Mr Reginald Harrington Lind.

But it was inevitable that Mr Shaw should begin his career by writing novels. To become "a professional man of genius" is one thing, and a thing perhaps satisfactory to the becomer, but the gross public must have

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proofs ; and Mr Shaw took the only means convenient to his hand to supply them. The stuff of these books shows that he might have distinguished himself as a critic long before “Corno di Basseto” or “G.B.S.” ever came into existence, by the unexpectedness of his opinions and the downright trenchancy of his style—for he had these qualities from the first. But it is only luck when so young a man is allowed to distinguish himself as a critic ; and that luck was denied to Mr Shaw. A critic does not write unless some journal opens its pages to him ; but no power can prevent the obscurest young man from composing independent works of imagination. In the seventies and eighties these naturally took the form of novels. There was, as we shall see, no theatre open to him, and it later took him arduous years to mould the English theatre to his own purposes. The practice of poetry did not suit his temperament, though he can write good verse. He therefore took the line of least resistance, did what

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everybody else was doing, and commenced novelist.

Whether, if he had met with earlier success or if other channels had not opened to him, he would have achieved greater distinction in this line it would be both difficult and unprofitable to decide. He himself has picked on some of his disabling faults with great acuteness.

“Conceive me then [he says in a late preface] at the writing of *The Irrational Knot* as a person neither belonging to the world I describe nor wholly ignorant of it, and on certain points quite incapable of conceiving it intuitively.”

And in the same confession :

“I had, as the reader will probably find to his cost, the classical tradition which makes all the persons in a novel, except the comically vernacular ones or the speakers of phonetically spelt dialect, utter themselves in the formal phrases and studied syntax of eighteenth-century rhetoric. In short, I

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wrote in the style of Scott and Dickens ; and as fashionable society then spoke and behaved, as it still does, in no style at all, my transcriptions of Oxford and Mayfair may nowadays suggest an unaccountable and ludicrous ignorance of a very superficial and accessible code of manners."

But these things do not altogether account for the stiffness and aridity which are the main impressions one takes away from the novels. No one who reads them can mistake their evidences of intellectual power, of a mind markedly independent, even if a little too anxious to show its independence. But in these books Mr Shaw is not only without the proper *form* for expressing himself ; he is also without the proper *tone* : he moves awkwardly because his sense of comedy and his gift for symbolic burlesque have not yet liberated themselves. One finds in them emphatic prophecies of the later—the liberated—Shaw. Writing in 1905 he finds in *The Irrational Knot* much the same morals which

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he expressed in *Major Barbara*—which, it may be observed, was written in that year. Ned Conolly, Lydia Carew and Sidney Trefusis are *raisonneurs* obviously foreshadowing John Tanner. In some ways Conolly and Trefusis, at least, are more rounded and completer delineations of character than any that appear later in the plays. But they are undoubtedly prigs, whose qualities are somewhat repellent and who have no admitted defects; while Tanner is not a prig and makes the comedy in which he appears by surrendering his principles to a stronger power.

Lydia Carew is, without comparison, the most stupendous prig in all Mr Shaw's works, and she could never have escaped destructive rebuke from any person less simple-minded and affectionate than Cashel Byron. She engages Alice Goff as a companion, not, apparently, for the ordinary purposes of companionship, for she allows Alice to go visiting alone in Scotland and imposes no duties on her, but so that she may on all

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occasions expound her views of life to the narrow, ill-educated country girl with a consciously snubbing superiority which makes one dislike her as heartily as one is obliged to agree with most of what she says. Lydia's discourses to Alice, to her cousin Lucian and to Cashel Byron are perfectly intolerable, not because one cannot accept or, at least, respect her ideas, but because she is a system of philosophy walking unnaturally in petticoats, without any modelling or human light and shade, of whom one feels that Cashel might as reasonably have married her essay on Spinoza as herself. This, however, is because her creator takes her with complete seriousness, not as a character in a comedy, although, strangely enough, the book which contains her is Mr Shaw's first real comedy, and therefore the most living and in all ways the most successful of his novels.

Cashel Byron, prize-fighter, is the first of the long series of comic philosophers which includes Henry Straker and Alfred Doolittle.

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He speaks in symbols drawn from the ring, but in the ring he has learned a good deal of life and formed his own philosophy of it. He is in his way as much of a *raisonneur* as Lydia—he does, indeed, deliver a set lecture at Mrs Hoskyns's party—but because he and his circumstances are comically imagined, and because the contrast between them and his philosophy is comically set forth, he is altogether more human and acceptable. When, in later years, Mr Shaw wrote that excellent burlesque, *The Admirable Bashville*, he was not making a joke about the novel on which it was founded : he was drawing out the natural vein of absurdity which that novel contained. Stevenson's judgment remains sound : “ If Mr Shaw is below five-and-twenty, let him go his path ; if he is thirty, he had best be told that he is a romantic, and pursue romance with his eyes open ; perhaps he knows it.” Mr Shaw was born romantic and moralist and iconoclast at once ; and therefore the only possible successful expression

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for him was in comedy. As a romantic he desired something more exciting and unexpected than we find in ordinary life ; as a moralist he desired to preach about the follies of ordinary life. There was no outlet for him save in comic—even farcical—exaggeration. In the other novels he merely preached, and the lively, the poetic side of his genius remained in abeyance ; but in *Cashel Byron's Profession* he first discovered how truth may be spoken more exuberantly, and therefore with more effect, in a jesting tone.

Instead of following up this discovery in the sphere of the novel he virtually abandoned creative composition for nine years, and first made himself famous as a critic. The effort required of him was, as he has recorded, a strenuous one ; and after he “ had survived seven years of London's music, four or five years of London's pictures and about as much of its current literature,” he sank into dramatic criticism as into a retiring post :

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“The difference between the leisure of a Persian cat and the labour of a Cockney cab horse is not greater than the difference between the official weekly or fortnightly playgoings of the theatre critic and the restless daily rushing to and fro of the music critic, from the stroke of three in the afternoon, when the concerts begin, to the stroke of twelve at night, when the opera ends. The pictures were nearly as bad. An Alpinist once, noticing the massive soles of my boots, asked me whether I climbed mountains. No, I replied: these boots are for the hard floors of the London galleries.”

For seven years he did this, and for only three years was he a dramatic critic; but the theatre, he declares, nearly killed him. In the theatre, however, his real work as a critic was done; and no doubt the fury of combativeness which impaired his health was aroused by the belief that he must, or perish, make a stage fit for real dramatists to live on. Along this line some destructive

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work was necessary before the constructive work could be usefully undertaken ; and it is not altogether extravagant to suppose that, had Mr Shaw ever had any intention of practising as a painter or a composer, his artistic and musical criticism would have had more interest for us to-day than it actually has. It is, however, merely journalism of an unusual ability and vivacity, and it is not at all likely that any of it will ever be reprinted. Even his book, *The Perfect Wagnerite*, treats Wagner less as a musician than as a dramatist who made a special use of musical illustration : one could, without difficulty, suppose it to be Mr Shaw's preface to his own version of *The Nibling's Ring*, or to a drama dealing with the life of its subject.

But the criticism which he contributed to *The Saturday Review*, a selection from which has been reprinted under the title, *Dramatic Opinions and Essays*, stands in a quite different category. We are nowadays divided in our opinions about what used to

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be called the New Drama, and not many of us are inclined to describe it in the terms of unmeasured eulogy which were applied to it by its champions even twenty years ago. But we are all agreed that it embodies an almost inconceivable advance on what preceded it. The modern dramatic critic finds plenty of fatuity and vapidty in the theatre, but the critic of Mr Shaw's time found very little else. The theatre of those days, which brutally drove away from it Meredith and Stevenson and Henley, was really not a fit place for a decent literary artist to enter.

Now the movement which changed this was by no means all Mr Shaw's doing, and it would be invidious, if it were possible, to estimate his precise share in the revolution which followed. But he and some of his contemporaries, among whom may be mentioned Mr J. T. Grein, Mr William Archer and Mr Henry Arthur Jones, were like men who should undertake the reduction to order of a long-neglected garden. It cannot be said even now that their effort was

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completely successful. But, where there were only tangles of barbarous weeds, there are now a good many spacious clearings where flowers and nourishing vegetables may be raised. Now it is obvious that you will enlist no sympathy for the enterprise of clearing a wilderness unless you have some definite idea of what you are going to plant there. Luckily the idea was not absent. There was Ibsen.

Mr Shaw claims to have been an Ibsenite before he knew anything of Ibsen, and, in particular, that

“*The Irrational Knot* may be regarded as an early attempt on the part of the Life Force to write *A Doll's House* in English by the instrumentality of a very immature writer aged twenty-four.”

However this may be, his first experiment in dramatic criticism was a volume called *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, published in 1891 and founded on a paper read to the Fabian Society in the previous year. The

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series of which this paper formed a part had the general heading of "Socialism in Contemporary Literature"; and the fact is curiously characteristic of a certain muddle-headedness in all the "advanced movements" of the time. Mr Shaw, as we shall see, is not too consistently clear-headed a thinker, and it may be assumed that his dæmonic and persuasive influence had something to do with the confusions of thought which marked that age and those circles. In this instance, it is hard to see any real connection between Ibsen and Socialism, save in so far as both were "new" and "advanced."

The confusion, however, gave us a valuable and characteristic work. "It is not," says its author, "a critical essay on the poetic beauties of Ibsen, but simply an exposition of Ibsenism"; and this gives us the key to Mr Shaw's activity as a critic. He is not by any means unaware of poetic beauties—that is to say, beauties resulting from an artist's expression of his *appreciation* of life; but he does not concern himself

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with them—save in the matter of acting, where he can hardly help himself. His business is with what he calls “ideas,” with intellectual consideration of standards of conduct. *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* is simply an account of Ibsen’s criticism of the standards of conduct which he found in common acceptance. Mr Shaw’s three years of labour on *The Saturday Review* were devoted to criticism, mostly destructive, of the standards of conduct which he there found nightly presented as natural and proper.

He regards every dramatic piece shown to him in the last resort from this point of view, and his thesis is fundamentally that moral standards change, and that the theatre ought both to register and to further this change. He states his position compactly and unmistakably in an essay on *The School for Scandal* :

“ It follows, does it not, that every ‘ immortal ’ play will run the following course ? First, like *London Assurance*, its manners

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and fashions will begin to date. If its matter is deep enough to tide it over this danger, it will come into repute again, like the comedies of Sheridan or Goldsmith, as a modern classic. But after some time—some centuries perhaps—it will begin to date again in point of its ethical conception. Yet if it deals so powerfully with the instincts and passions of humanity as to survive this also, it will again regain its place, this time as an antique classic, especially if it tells a capital story. It is impossible now to read, without a curdling of the blood and a bristling of the hair, the frightful but dramatically most powerful speech which David, on his death-bed, delivers to his son about the old enemy whom he had himself sworn to spare. ‘Thou art a wise man and knowest what thou oughtest to do unto him ; but his hoar head bring thou down to the grave with blood.’ Odysseus, proud of outwitting all men at cheating and lying, and intensely relishing the blood of Penelope’s suitors, is equally outside our morality. So is Punch. But David and Ulysses, like Punch and

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Judy, will survive for many a long day yet. Not until the change has reached our instincts and passions will their stories begin to 'date' again for the last time before their final obsolescence."

Mr Shaw goes on to criticise the play under notice on the ground that nowadays Lady Teazle's belated repentance seems to us as caddish as Joseph's hypocrisy and exclaims: "I cannot for the life of me see why it is less dishonourable for a woman to kiss and tell than a man." He believed, in short, that he saw a progressive change for the better in human morality, and his recurring complaint for three years was that the theatre was taking no proper account of this change. Dramatists and audiences continued mechanically to accept conventions of conduct which no longer had any life or meaning left in them; and he devoted all his energies to showing that this was so and to demanding that it should cease to be so.

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Pursued so exclusively, this is a narrowing point of doctrine for both critic and dramatist, though, as may be gathered from the passage above quoted, Mr Shaw was by no means unaware of the other elements in the drama. But in adopting this point of view he was acting in strict and fruitful consonance with his own nature, his nature of moralist and evangelist. His insistence on it and his trenchancy in expressing it have led to many misconceptions in the minds of persons who could not see that he was, so to speak, attacking on a narrow front, because the character of his gifts and the conditions of his time compelled him to do so. He is far more of a praiser of Shakespeare than is generally supposed, but it is not surprising that memories of his praise should be effaced by such judgments as this, on *Cymbeline* :

“ It is for the most part stagy trash of the lowest melodramatic order, in parts abominably written, throughout intellectually

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vulgar, foolish, offensive, indecent, and exasperating beyond all tolerance.”¹

But this, hopelessly wrong as it is in emphasis, becomes more useful than the ordinary conventional praise of Shakespeare, when one understands that it is uttered by a man who wants to get something done, not a man who is making in the abstract as near an approach as possible to absolute truth. In his criticism (as, indeed, in his plays) Mr Shaw spoke always with a desire to get something done, to produce a practical effect on his audience, and in this he was successful. The English theatre in 1898 was preparing to be a more lively and modern institution than it had been in 1895.

¹ Since this was written, nearly every dramatic critic in London has repeated Mr Shaw's twenty-years-old opinion of *Cymbeline*, each adding his own variants of invective.

III

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AS we have seen, the theatre at the beginning of Mr Shaw's career seemed to be an intellectual vacuum which ought to have dragged him irresistibly towards it. But the vacuum of intellect was for the moment completely filled with other things ; and, if we except the beginning of an apparently eccentric Passion Play in verse, he attempted nothing for the stage until 1885, soon after he had given up the writing of novels, and did not complete any dramatic piece until 1892. In that year Mr J. T. Grein and the Independent Theatre Society, having already come much into prominence by the production of Ibsen's *Ghosts*, found themselves still at a loss for a native masterpiece, which want Mr Shaw undertook to supply.

In fulfilment of his promise he resurrected

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two acts of a piece which seven years earlier he had begun to write in collaboration with Mr William Archer. Mr Archer was to have supplied the plot and the title was to have been *Rhinegold*. Mr Shaw, however, had his own method of treatment for Mr Archer's "thoroughly planned scheme for a sympathetically romantic 'well-made play' of the type then in vogue," and he "perversely distorted it into a grotesquely realistic exposure of slum landlordism, municipal jobbery, and the pecuniary and matrimonial ties between them and the pleasant people of 'independent' incomes who imagine that such matters do not touch their own lives." The result, *Widowers' Houses*, "revoltingly incongruous" as it was, was produced; and, says the author, "I had not achieved a success; but I had provoked an uproar."

This was much to his taste, and in the following year he wrote *The Philanderer*, also for the Independent Theatre, only to find that an adequate cast was not to be obtained. Undaunted, he wrote *Mrs*

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Warren's Profession and found that the existence of the Censorship made production impossible. Spurred on by Miss Florence Farr, who had gone into management at the Avenue Theatre, he wrote *Arms and the Man* for her, and she produced it in 1894. And in 1896 he wrote *You Never Can Tell*, at the request of Mr Cyril Maude, who was so baffled by it and its author that it had to be withdrawn after it had been put into rehearsal.

It will be observed that in all these instances it was some outside and specific demand which brought Mr Shaw to the point of putting pen to paper. Indeed, as he himself has owned, several of his plays are purely *pièces d'occasion*. Critics of the theatre commonly divide into two schools, one of which holds that the play is what matters and that the acting, unless obviously inadequate, need not be much thought of, while the other goes to the theatre only to see and consider the acting. But Mr Shaw, in spite of his continuous and copious demands

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for decently written plays expressing intelligent ideas, was also an attentive and shrewd judge of acting (did he not discover Miss Lillah McCarthy in an amateur performance?), and, more still, was a keen lover of good acting for its own sake, with a capacity for feeling, and communicating, much gusto in it. Therefore he has written more than is always realised purely for acting. *The Man of Destiny*, he says, was "hardly more than a bravura piece to display the virtuosity of the two principal performers"; and he makes the same excuse in 1919, twenty-two years later, for *Annajanska, the Bolshevik Empress*—which, to be sure, stands in much greater need of being excused.

So much must be said lest I be suspected of holding that Mr Shaw is merely an "advanced" propagandist who has chosen the theatre as a ready and insidious instrument for the furthering of his ideas. There have been such in our time; and some of them have even learnt the technique of drama

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with such skill as the devil might display in learning the technique of the pulpit. But Mr Shaw is essentially a man of the theatre, and his natural affinity for the stage is as strong in him as his evangelical tendency. Cashel Byron says of himself :

“ I had no trouble about fighting then. Somehow, I could tell by instinct when the other fellow was going to hit me ; and I always hit him first. It’s the same with me now in the ring : I know what a man is going to do before he rightly knows himself.”

This is what, in a special sense, we call genius ; it is the instinctively right adaptation of means to end, and Mr Shaw possesses it on the stage, as Nelson at sea and Napoleon on land. Sometimes, indeed, an artist who possesses it is not so great as one who does not : few critics would, in the last resort, rank Chopin above Beethoven. But it is a wonderful and delightful thing, and to witness it in working exhilarates the human spirit in a peculiar way. And what I mean

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when I say that Mr Shaw possesses it is no more or less than this: that his gift of dramatic exposition is as nearly perfect as can be conceived. His theme may be trivial or vulgar, his characters may be exaggerated or tame, but out of the materials with which he has provided himself he will always, by the means of stage action and dialogue, produce the maximum of effect. He is, I say again, essentially a man of the theatre.

So far as technique goes he has made no innovations worth considering, for his "preservation of the unities" (with one malicious eye cocked to see how Mr Walkley likes it) in *Getting Married* and *Misalliance* is of no great importance. He has followed where Ibsen led, eschewing asides and soliloquies and striving for an easier, more natural concatenation of events than is to be found in the theatre of Scribe and Sardou. There is, to be sure, a brief soliloquy placed in Sartorius's mouth in *Widowers' Houses*, but it is very naturally introduced, and was in

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any case an experiment which was not repeated. No ; Mr Shaw's mastery of the stage does not depend on any new method invented by him of handling the dramatist's instruments, but simply on an instinctive feeling for their natural use.

The ideas which he thus presents differ very much in character and quality. When one surveys the range of his thirty-two pieces one is astonished by their variety of subject and colouring. The "New Drama" has been frequently accused of drabness and monotony ; but the accusation does not apply to Mr Shaw. He ranges from the dentist's chair to the Serbo-Bulgarian War of 1885, from the Court of Queen Elizabeth to a camp in the Wild West, from a Salvation Army settlement to a scene in the future "as far as thought can reach." Some of his pieces are, as I have said, merely occasional and playful, though even in these he takes some idea to play with : some are concerned with the discussion of social problems and some with the presentation

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of a philosophy of life. But no clear division into classes or periods is possible, for all these things run into one another.

It can be said, however, that Mr Shaw has progressed steadily in the direction of philosophy, and perhaps that *Man and Superman* (written 1901-1903) will serve as a boundary mark between his earlier and his later work. Before this piece he was more exclusively the dramatist presenting isolated problems of situation and character; since he has been more exclusively the philosopher preaching under whatever forms a definite, if developing, attitude towards life and the world. Though he has never been unwilling to teach, and has rarely ceased to interest, yet in the earlier period, whether consciously or not, he laid more emphasis on interesting his audience and in the later more emphasis on teaching it.

His first piece, *Widowers' Houses*, was, indeed, almost solely concerned with a social problem, and has little attraction for us now save as an early revelation of his power

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to manœuvre persons on the stage with unostentatious ingenuity. His second, *The Philanderer*, with its scene set at the Ibsen Club, with the mannish Sylvia and her too-womanly sister Julia, with the dramatic critic who says that he has "passed his life amid scenes of suffering nobly endured and sacrifice willingly rendered by womanly women and manly men," with the retired Anglo-Indian condemned by his doctor to death from a new disease and with the doctor outraged by a rival's proof that the disease has no real existence—this would have been only a delightful satire on the advanced tendencies with which Mr Shaw was supposed to be associated, had it not been for the constantly recurring thread of discussion about "grotesque sexual compacts" which has rightly led its author to classify it as "unpleasant." But this intrusion, though obviously deeply felt, is inconclusive and ineffective, and spoils the play by its incongruity. There is, however, a foretaste of things to come

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in Grace Tranfield's rejection of Leonard Charteris :

“ ‘ I will never marry a man I love too much. It would give him a terrible advantage over me : I should be utterly in his power. That's what the New Woman is like. Isn't she right, Mr Philosopher ? ’ ”

With the third play, *Mrs Warren's Profession*, we are again studying a social problem—the problem, indeed, which has been dignified with the title of “ *the social evil*.” Here Mr Shaw says that he has “ gone straight at the fact that, as Mrs Warren puts it, ‘ the only way for a woman to provide for herself decently is for her to be good to some man that can afford to be good to her. ’ ” Of course it isn't quite a fact, though it was more of a fact in 1893 than it is now. Vivie Warren, to her creator's pride and pleasure, showed the way out by taking up the profession of actuarial calculation. That was something of a wonder and a revelation thirty years ago ; but now that

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it or its like is not far from a commonplace we are asking ourselves whether it is really an all-sufficient way out. Vivie Warren, with her whiskies-and-sodas and her cigars, already dates a little. What is interesting in this piece, apart from the light-hearted comedy of Frank Gardner and his father, is Mr Shaw's exhibition of his powers as a debater through the mouth of Mrs Warren. Mrs Warren makes out an excellent debating case, and her briskness of argument almost makes one forget to inquire whether her formula really does, as she pretends it does, cover all marriages.

Here endeth the preliminary period during which Mr Shaw youthfully enjoyed rubbing the noses of his public in the dirt. There follow four "Pleasant Plays" and three "Plays for Puritans," which first fully reveal his innate comic powers and first fully betray the romanticism which Stevenson so shrewdly detected in him. All of these, except *Candida*, which is very accurately subtitled "A Mystery," are pure comedies,

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and all in the diversity of their scenes and the bizarreness of their situations show the romanticism which consists in a desire for things more exciting and unexpected than we find in ordinary life. A dentist brings down the curtain by administering gas to a patient who is not expecting it. Cæsar and his men, surrounded by their enemies, fling Cleopatra into the sea, jump after her and swim to safety. An officer of the defeated Serbian army, pursued by drunken Bulgarian soldiers, takes refuge in a young lady's bedroom and is protected by her. Dick Dudgeon, about to give his life for another man, exchanges witticisms with General Burgoyne, who is about to hang him. Captain Brassbound is a romantic gentleman of fortune—even if Lady Cicely Waynefflete does laugh at him. And we are whirled from the American War of Independence to Alexandria in the first century before Christ, to Napoleon's quarters during the Italian campaign, to a castle in the interior of Morocco.

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Already in *Mrs Warren's Profession* Mr Shaw was to be seen exuberantly chafing against the narrow restrictions of realism. He wanted to rejoice in the vast potentialities which human nature so rarely brings into play, he wanted to laugh at human follies and he wanted, most earnestly, to reprove human failings. To do all these things within the limits of strict realism was not within his power; he therefore took refuge in a series of incidents which were not probable, but were at least possible. He gained by this a good deal of freedom, while remaining able to believe that he was also faithfully portraying life as it is. It is very likely that his admiration of Ibsen made the strict matter-of-factness of the social life presented in the master's later plays something of a burden to him. He wanted to deal with life as he conceived it really to be, not with it as it manifests itself in Surrey cottages and Surbiton villas. His persons were to be comic, but he must somehow find for them backgrounds against which they

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could be spaciously and romantically comic. Therefore it is in the Balkans that Bluntschli expounds the romance of modern war and in Morocco that Lady Cicely makes Captain Brassbound look a fool.

At the end of this period it seems suddenly to have occurred to Mr Shaw that the drama, whatever its setting, need not reproduce the everyday outward manifestations of life ; and in 1901, in response to a challenge made by Mr Walkley, he began to write *Man and Superman*. John Tanner, in this play, is not the best, but he is the most recognisably typical, of Mr Shaw's heroes ; and he is essentially a romantic figure. The heroes of Dumas would beat off five cut-throats at once with their rapiers : John Tanner beats off five reactionaries at once with his wit. The exploit of the one is no more exaggerated and untrue to life than that of the other ; and in each we are excited and exhilarated by the superhuman prodigies performed. But the change in Mr Shaw's manner consists in a good deal more than

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this. In *Man and Superman* he gives us an exaggerated, caricatured and simplified version of humanity in order to make plain what he considers to be the truth. "Every woman," he says, "is not Ann: but Ann is Everywoman." She is, that is to say, a type so typical and so far abstracted from the accidents of life as to have become almost a mythological figure. And we must remember this when we are tempted to protest that her shifts and mendacities are improbable, that she would not have dared to lie so crudely to Tanner about her sister and to her sister about Tanner, that her dialogue with Tanner at the climax of the play contains such speeches as never were in any woman's mouth. But let us for a moment consider this remarkable dialogue :

TANNER (*despairingly*). Oh, you are witty :
at the supreme moment the Life Force
endows you with every quality. Well,
I too can be a hypocrite. Your father's
will appointed me your guardian, not

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your suitor. I shall be faithful to my trust.

ANN (*in low siren tones*). He asked me who would I have as my guardian before he made that will. I chose you !

TANNER. The will is yours then ! The trap was laid from the beginning.

ANN (*concentrating all her magic*). From the beginning—from our childhood—for both of us—by the Life Force.

TANNER. I will not marry you. I will not marry you.

ANN. Oh, you will, you will.

TANNER. I tell you, no, no, no.

ANN. I tell you, yes, yes, yes.

TANNER. No.

ANN (*coaxing — imploring — almost exhausted*). Yes. Before it is too late for repentance. Yes.

TANNER. When did all this happen to me before ? Are we two dreaming ?

ANN (*suddenly losing her courage, with an anguish that she does not conceal*). No. We are awake ; and you have said no : that is all.

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TANNER (*brutally*). Well ?

ANN. Well, I made a mistake : you do not love me.

TANNER (*seizing her in his arms*). It is false : I love you. The Life Force enchants me : I have the whole world in my arms when I clasp you. But I am fighting for my freedom, for my honour, for my self, one and indivisible.

ANN. Your happiness will be worth them all.

TANNER. You would sell freedom and honour and self for happiness ?

ANN. It will not be all happiness for me. Perhaps death.

TANNER (*groaning*). Oh, that clutch holds and hurts. What have you grasped in me ? Is there a father's heart as well as a mother's ?

ANN. Take care, Jack : if anyone comes while we are like this, you will have to marry me.

TANNER. If we two stood now on the edge of a precipice, I would hold you tight and jump.

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ANN (*panting, failing more and more under the strain*). Jack: let me go. I have dared so frightfully—it is lasting longer than I thought. Let me go: I can't bear it.

TANNER. Nor I. Let it kill us.

ANN. Yes: I don't care. I am at the end of my forces. I don't care. I think I am going to faint.

This, of course, is neither more nor less than the method of the poetic drama: people do not talk like this in real life any more than they talk in blank verse. If Ann were capable of expressing so articulately her true feelings, even in a moment of calm, she would not be the perfectly normal young woman Mr Shaw wishes and persuades us to think her. If she had been portrayed realistically her actions and her speeches would have been subtler, less obviously to the one point, and, it goes without saying, less conscious; but, Mr Shaw asserts, her true motives would not have been different.

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And his object here is not to imitate the appearances of life, but to explain to his audience the real reality beyond these misleading shows. To explain : this word expresses the difference between his method and that of the poetic drama as we know it in Shakespeare, whose " lady doctor " in *All's Well That Ends Well* he quotes as a prototype of Ann Whitefield. Mr Shaw makes his abstraction and uses his convention for the purpose of *explaining* a view of how life works and how it ought to work. In the preface to this work he says :

" I read Dickens and Shakespeare without shame or stint ; but their pregnant observations and demonstrations of life are not co-ordinated into any philosophy or religion : on the contrary, Dickens's sentimental assumptions are violently contradicted by his observations ; and Shakespeare's pessimism is only his wounded humanity. Both have the specific genius of the fictionist and the common sympathies of human feeling

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and thought in pre-eminent degree. They are often saner and shrewder than the philosophers, just as Sancho Panza was often saner and shrewder than Don Quixote. They clear away vast masses of oppressive gravity by their sense of the ridiculous, which is at bottom a combination of sound moral judgment with light-hearted good humour. But they are concerned with the diversities of the world instead of with its unities: they are so irreligious that they exploit popular religion for professional purposes without delicacy or scruple (for example, Sydney Carton and the ghost in *Hamlet*!): they are anarchical and cannot balance their exposures of Angelo and Dogberry, Sir Leicester Dedlock and Mr Tite Barnacle, with any portrait of a prophet or a worthy leader: they have no constructive ideas: they regard those who have them as dangerous fanatics: in all their fictions there is no leading thought or inspiration for which any man could conceivably risk the spoiling of his hat in a shower, much less his life."

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So Mr Shaw, in a very interesting profession of belief, on the purpose of art. There is no need to quarrel with him for it. But it may be observed that he is trying to do one thing and Shakespeare another. Shakespeare presents as rich an image of life as he can, and communicates no more by the image than his own intense abundant appreciation of life. Mr Shaw demands, and attempts to supply, a co-ordination of the essential facts of life into a system ; but the intellectual effort required for this is a comparatively clumsy instrument which misses much of what is real in life and rules out most of the vague but electric intuitions of the poet. It may also be observed that *All's Well That Ends Well*, though more confused and perplexing, is a subtler, deeper, richer work than *Man and Superman*. To use these adjectives is perhaps to beg a question which I would rather not raise at all. Shakespeare is one kind of artist, Mr Shaw another ; and it is much more important to define and distinguish between the two kinds than to

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enter into any argument as to which is the superior—though I imagine that, definition and distinction once clearly established, the good judgment of mankind has no difficulty in making its choice.

To return, however, to the previous argument—this definite and unmistakable breach with realism, with the imitation of the appearances of life, has in the main governed Mr Shaw's work during the last twenty-odd years. Since *Man and Superman* he has written plays of all his old sorts. *Press Cuttings* and *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets* are light-hearted little *jeux d'esprit* written for immediate and transient occasions. In *The Shewing-up of Blanco Posnet* he looks for a background for the declaration of doctrine in the Wild West of America. *Pygmalion* and *The Doctor's Dilemma* are little more than plays of character and situation; and they are, therefore, relatively speaking, failures, for he requires something more to call out his full powers.

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Nevertheless, when Mr Shaw had once learnt the trick of deliberate exaggeration and unreality he did not forget it ; and the result is that in many of his later plays, until we adjust our perceptions to his intentions, we seem to ourselves to have come into a houseful of ill-mannered lunatics. This is true even of plays discussing immediate social problems, such as *Getting Married* and *Misalliance*. It is less true of *John Bull's Other Island*, which is peculiar among Mr Shaw's work in dealing with a definite and contemporary political issue, and of *Major Barbara*, which is, however, one of the series of essentially philosophical plays which began with *Man and Superman*. It is very emphatically true of *Heartbreak House*, a play which stands to all Mr Shaw's other work much as the Ninth Symphony to the rest of Beethoven's music. You may say that the master had grown deaf, and wilful to the point of eccentricity, when he wrote it ; but it leaves an impression of confused but undoubted intellectual splendour, only

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half understood and perhaps not much more than half expressed.

Mr Shaw's insistence on explaining something or other to his audience (and even in his *jeux d'esprit* he wants to explain something, such as, in *The Dark Lady*, a totally fantastic notion of how Shakespeare wrote verse) naturally determines the character of all his dramatic work. His characters must not be quite themselves, they must never forget that they are put on the stage to expound some theory which has been born in their creator's mind or else to be convinced of that theory. It has been said of Shakespeare's characters that they seem to us to have as vivid and real an existence outside the play as in it, off the stage as on. (This feeling is so strong that a modern poet has written plays about the early lives of some of Shakespeare's characters.) The same cannot be said, without reservation, of Mr Shaw's people. For the most part they appear before us ready-made and we know no more of them than they tell us themselves.

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And, in a measure, this is as it should be. Ann Whitefield can have no past and no future which could interest us in competition with the short, supreme period during which Mr Shaw compels her to behave and speak, not as she would do in nature, but in open revelation of what is going on at the back of her mind. No one could conceive a whole lifetime in such terms as these ; and, in this connection, it is worth remarking that there are no long lapses of time between the acts of Mr Shaw's plays. Nor is there anywhere in them anything which can strictly be called development of character. Mr Shaw's favourite situation is that in which a man discovers the unsuspected truth about himself in a lightning flash. Eugene Marchbanks's experience in *Candida* will serve as a type of all :

CANDIDA. How old are you, Eugene ?

MARCHBANKS. As old as the world now.

This morning I was eighteen.

Mr Shaw's principal characters, then, are

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either static or subjected to one violent and final revolution. And the part they play in the comedy is strictly analogous to the part played by the hero in a romantic drama. They are protagonists ; and they must be spectacular and bestride the stage even when discomfort has made them ridiculous. But though this springs from Mr Shaw's conception of the artist as preacher, he is not always a preacher and is sometimes purely a comic artist. From this mood springs a row of characters who make up, if not the most important, at any rate the most human and endearing part of his work. The principal characters are, with more or less deliberation, abstractions from humanity : the lesser comic characters are human beings drawn in very much the spirit of Shakespeare or Dickens. Such are the mellifluous William, the waiter in *You Never Can Tell*, Enry Straker in *Man and Superman*, Alfred Doolittle in *Pygmalion*, Emmy in *The Doctor's Dilemma* and a score of others, among whom Androcles, in the enchanted

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air of an *opéra bouffe* Imperial Rome, very nearly succeeds in taking the middle of the stage and voicing his creator's ideas. Unfortunately, he is ousted by the more consciously philosophical Lavinia.

In considering these characters one tends alternately to forget what a solid and satisfactory background they make for the exposition of ideas and to forget that, after all, they are only a background. They do sometimes come disproportionately to the front in final after-impressions of a play. How William dominates one's recollections of *You Never Can Tell*, even on the printed page, and even though in fact he has so little to say ! It would not be easy to forget the scene in which he learns that the father of the Clandons is coming to lunch with them, and observes diplomatically : " Don't usually lunch with his family, perhaps, sir ? " or the vivid touch by which, when he is embarrassed to tears by the advent of his majestic barrister son, he is restored to happiness by being given orders to execute.

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Perhaps these surely useless persons are inserted by Mr Shaw the evangelist as a sop for his audiences: perhaps they are an involuntary admission of his kinship with such unphilosophical, unco-ordinating writers as Shakespeare and Dickens, who, like God, create and yet do not offer any intelligible reason for doing so. But a man with a philosophy to preach who chooses a form of art as his medium instead of using plain, straightforward argument thereby suggests that his doctrine is one of those volatile spirits which must be combined with something more solid before it can be put into practical use. (This image is, I think, less misleading than that of the jam and the powder.) It goes without saying that only superb stagecraft could effect this combination without an air of incongruity. But Mr Shaw's comic spirit pervades his plays like an atmosphere, so that there is no doubt as to Tanner and Enry Straker breathing the same air.

The fault of this comic spirit is that it is

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not always under control. Mr Shaw has a peculiar weakness for cheap jokes. In *Man and Superman* the following dialogue occurs :—

TANNER. It is the tame elephants who enjoy capturing the wild ones.

ANN. I am getting on. Yesterday I was a boa-constrictor : to-day I am an elephant.

TANNER. Yes. So pack your trunk and begone. I have no more to say to you.

This does no harm : its boyish *naïveté* is even pleasing. But he is capable of other sorts of jokes which are not so amusing. In *Back to Methuselah*, in A.D. 2170, the President of the British Islands has occasion to ring up the Minister of Health. The future telephone, be it remarked, gives a picture as well as a voice. This scene follows :—

BURGE-LUBIN *operates his switchboard as before. The screen vanishes, and a dainty room, with a bed, a wardrobe, and a dressing-*

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table with a mirror and a switch on it, appears. Seated at it a handsome negress is trying on a brilliant head-scarf. Her dressing-gown is thrown back from her shoulders to her chair. She is in corset, knickers, and silk stockings.

BURGE - LUBIN (*horrified*). I beg your pardon a thousand times. (*The startled NEGRESS snatches the peg out of her switch-board and vanishes.*)

THE NEGRESS'S VOICE. Who is it?

BURGE-LUBIN. Me. The President. Burge-Lubin. I had no idea your bedroom switch was in. I beg your pardon.

THE NEGRESS *reappears*. *She has pulled the dressing-gown perfunctorily over her shoulders, and continues her experiments with the scarf, not at all put out, and rather amused by BURGE'S prudery.*

THE NEGRESS. Stupid of me. I was talking to another lady this morning, and I left the peg in.

This is not particularly offensive, but it is very trivial and a little vulgar ; and one is

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inclined to wonder at the sense of fun that can waste any time over it.

Mr Shaw's own view of what comedy should be is very definitely stated. In a late addition to *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* he writes of "the extraordinary fascination of this mirthless comedy, this tragedy that stripped the soul naked instead of bedizening it in heroic trappings." And in the course of an address on Tolstoy as a dramatist, delivered in 1920, he said :

"Tolstoy is now easily classed as a tragi-comedian, pending the invention of a better term. Of all the dramatic poets he has the most withering touch when he wants to destroy. His novels show this over and over again. A man enters a house where someone lies dead. There is no moralising, no overt irony : Tolstoy, with the simplicity he affects so well, just tells you that the undertaker has left the coffin lid propped against the wall in the entrance hall, and that the visitor goes into the drawing-room and sits

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down on a *pouf*. Instantly the mockery and folly of our funeral pomps and cemetery sentimentalities laugh in our faces. A judge goes into court to set himself up as divine justice and send his fellow-creatures to the gallows. Tolstoy does not improve the occasion and allow his brow to contract or his eye to twinkle ; but he mentions that before the judge leaves his room he goes through a few gymnastic exercises. Instantly that judge is in the mud with his ermine and scarlet, making him and all judges unspeakably ridiculous. Dickens makes us laugh by describing how the handle of the Orfling's corkscrew comes off and hits her on the chin. We applaud the wanton humorist ; but the Orfling is none the worse five minutes later. Tolstoy could slay a soul with a corkscrew without letting you know either that he was a humorist or that you are laughing."

If this be truly the manner in which modern comedy must be written, then Mr Shaw is unsatisfactory as a modern comedian.

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Hardly any one of his plays, after the "Unpleasant" series, except *Heartbreak House*, come within this definition; and one may surmise that *Heartbreak House* and the definition have had mutual reactions. Tolstoy and Ibsen were great men, but their view of life left something out. Mr Shaw's view of life leaves something out (every artist must, even Shakespeare), but he has something which Tolstoy and Ibsen had not—a natural sunniness of temperament. So it happens that he can hardly help writing "Pleasant" plays. His humour is by no means mirthless, and instead of slaying souls it, at the utmost, removes illusions in a gentle and kindly way. Read the admirably natural scene in which Enry Straker, by a series of long whistles and a contemptuous assertion, enlightens Tanner as to Ann's intentions: read the two deliciously farcical scenes between Androcles and the lion: read almost any scene in *Fanny's First Play*. Mr Shaw, like so many others, is inclined to admire what is out of his reach:

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it is certainly out of his reach to be mirthless or bitter.

Behind his gift of stagecraft comes his gift of writing natural, vigorous and vivid dialogue. The excerpts I have made in this chapter will reveal to a little study how important a gift this is. Mr Shaw has himself remarked that it is indispensable and also that it is almost impossible to define the qualities of good dramatic dialogue. Simplicity, the use of short and easy words, as he rightly says, counts for nothing. The proof of the pudding is here very decidedly in the eating; and we must be content to let it go at that. But it would be impossible to conclude a survey of Mr Shaw's plays without comment on the flexibility and power in his hands of this primary technical instrument. His language is natural, without being casual, and correct without being "literary." He uses very sparingly, it is interesting to notice, the ordinary abbreviations of colloquial speech. The dialogue of the plays makes a curious contrast with the

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rather stiff and archaic dialogue of the novels. It is supple enough to be able to pass without incongruity from the most ordinary conversational exchanges to the long and elaborate tirades for which Mr Shaw is celebrated. It is, in fact, as good dramatic prose as any to be found in modern English.

This survey of Mr Shaw's plays is brief and cursory ; and I have reserved certain aspects of them for consideration in later chapters. There are thirty-six of them (counting the five parts of *Back to Methuselah* as separate pieces), and the number equals that of the generally received Shakespearean canon. Whether Mr Shaw is, in fact, or not our second dramatist is a question I shall not discuss here. But the range and variety of his work, its multiplicity of interests and colours, its number of memorable characters entitle him, at any rate, apart from his work as a preacher, to a definite and permanent place in our dramatic literature.

IV

THE WRITER OF PREFACES

UNDER this heading I propose to deal with the argumentative Shaw, the Shaw who does not care whether it is his grandmother or his grandchildren whom he is teaching to suck eggs, so long as he is delivering a lecture on that subject to someone. This chapter will therefore range a little wider than its title strictly implies ; but his prefaces fairly represent all that is essential in this side of my subject.

Mr Shaw's fondness for writing prefaces has been so long a joke that no one any longer cares to be witty on it. He can never resist the opportunity, he never has, so far as I know, resisted it. A book ready for press or public seems to affect him much as a blank wall affects an errand-boy with a new pencil : he positively must scribble something on it, whether it is relevant or

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not. Of that amusing but not very significant little piece, *How He Lied to Her Husband*, he had one thing to say. It was written for the benefit of Mr Arnold Daly, who found that *The Man of Destiny* was too long to be played as a curtain-raiser and too short to be played alone. The rest of the preface, which fills over five pages, is about the public reception of *Mrs Warren's Profession*, on the sole pretext that it also was produced by Mr Daly. This is as though a man writing to his aunt to announce the dispatch of a brace of pheasants should add four or five sheets on his relations with his wife. The preface to *Pygmalion*, to take another example, is rather pathetic. It is the story of a flower-girl turned into a lady by a man with a genius for teaching phonetics ; it has what is called a strong human interest and no particular bearing on either social or philosophical problems. The unfortunate Mr Shaw, therefore, as desperate as a dram-drinker whose supply of liquor is threatened, wrote a preface on the Science

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of Phonetics, coupled with the name of the late Henry Sweet. This conveyed an impression that *Pygmalion* was entirely concerned with the different existing pronunciations of the English language, which fortunately it is not. If it were, it would be quite intolerable; as it is largely so concerned, it is often a little dull.

The prefaces began with the necessity under which he found himself (it is not easy for us to understand to-day why it should have been necessary) of explaining why he had published his plays as if they were really works of literature. The blindness of the commercial theatre, the limited resources of English acting, the existence of the Censorship and also, perhaps, a certain want of response in the public denied to these pieces the audience for which they were intended. Mr Shaw therefore committed them to print and explained why he had done so. There was nothing odd in the existence of these prefaces, though they were, as a matter of fact, essays on the theatre in general and

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Mr Shaw in particular. The preface to *Three Plays for Puritans* takes a more general view of the theatre and demands that it shall "turn from the drama of romance and sensuality to the drama of edification": it also explains that the author does not suppose himself a better dramatist than Shakespeare but that he does suppose himself to have a better brain. But there are excursuses on the "Diabolonian Ethics" of Dick Dudgeon, on the character of General Burgoyne and on the character of Julius Cæsar, which indicate that the unrelentingly expository Shaw is about to manifest himself. And manifest himself he does in *Man and Superman* in a long "Epistle Dedicatory" and an appendix containing the complete text of the book supposed to have been written by John Tanner. It is from this point on that Mr Shaw's prefaces become something of a joke.

It would perhaps be a little harsh to say of him that he is the kind of man who is always writing to *The Times*, a sort of

intellectual Lord Sydenham, unhampered by any feeling of personal responsibility for the British Empire. But he has in him the main component of such a character, an innocent and absorbed interest in his own ideas on any subject whatsoever. No doubt he is more like a universal genius than most men. He has criticised all the arts, at least without being unmasked as an impostor, and, as an early member of the Fabian Society, he has been something of a political force. But his own view of himself as mentor in general to the English public rests on somewhat different grounds. His sight, he has told us somewhere, is perfectly normal, a very rare thing; and he believes his intellectual vision to be no less normal and unusual in its perception of truth. Sometimes he takes up another standpoint, as in the exordium to his famous pamphlet, *Common Sense about the War* :

“ Until Home Rule emerges from its present suspended animation, I shall retain my

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Irish capacity for criticising England with something of the detachment of a foreigner, and perhaps with a certain slightly malicious taste for taking the conceit out of her. Having thus frankly confessed my bias, which you can allow for as a rifleman allows for the wind, I give my views for what they are worth. They will be of some use ; because, however blinded I may be by prejudice or perversity, my prejudices in this matter are not those which blind the British patriot, and therefore I am fairly sure to see some things that have not yet struck him."

In both cases the assumption is that Mr Shaw is in a position to enlighten the public on matters of interest to it, not as a special student of the matter under consideration, but as a man of common sense applying common-sense tests to facts of common knowledge—that is to say, in brief, a pamphleteer. And hence it has come about that most of his prefaces are merely excuses for pamphlets on matters of general interest. The preface to *John Bull's Other Island* is a

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pamphlet on Home Rule and British Imperialism in general, with a reference to the Denshawai affair. The preface to *The Doctor's Dilemma* is a pamphlet on the medical profession and that to *The Shewing-up of Blanco Posnet* a pamphlet on the Censorship. Sometimes, as with *Major Barbara* and *Heartbreak House*, the preface is a direct exposition of the thesis of the play ; and this, incidentally, is an illustration of the weakness of the thesis-play, that a dramatist *cannot* present, unimpaired and unmistakable, the whole of his own philosophy.

But good literature has come into existence under further-fetched pretexts than this ; and the occasions Mr Shaw chooses for the issue of his pamphlets are entirely a matter of his own convenience. It is more important to examine the character of these documents.

In the first chapter of this book I said that Mr Shaw had learned the art of public speaking in the school of the street corner and the debating society and that this had left a

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permanent mark on his style. His style is precisely that of the debater, of a very skilful debater ; and it is only natural that he should find the drama incapable of giving full scope to his powers in this direction. A debate on the stage must often seem to the naturally argumentative mind as tedious a business as playing noughts and crosses with the right hand against the left. To be sure he can often score off his audience by this means, as in *Getting Married*, where the drawing up of an extra-legal marriage contract is very skilfully and unscrupulously represented as more impracticable than it need be. But such triumphs could hardly satisfy the whole of Mr Shaw's appetite for argument, and he therefore exercises his debating powers in his prefaces.

He has in this capacity all the merits and all the defects of the debater, whose concern is to keep his end up, to score immediately, not to be put out of countenance, to pass over the weak links in his case as adroitly and unnoticeably as he can. Normal vision,

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common sense, impartial consideration of facts take a much smaller place in his equipment than does the air of them. Mr Shaw does not really possess any one of them to a marked degree. He is not an exceptionally reasonable man ; and though his intellectual powers are great and flexible they are always completely at the service of his emotions and intuitions. Poets express their emotions and intuitions by means of a chain of images, Mr Shaw by means of a series of arguments. But if we take some flaw in the argument (and, indeed, there are many) as evidence against the reality or the value of the underlying emotions and intuitions, we shall be as far astray as the scientist who asserted that Shelley's skylark *was* a bird and that the line, " Bird thou never wert," was a thumping lie.

There is no doubt that if we look at him in cold blood Mr Shaw gives as much evidence of muddle-headedness as of common sense. He does not always find tenable reasons for the faith he holds. His desire to

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be always in the forefront of the movement, to be, in the words of Roebuck Ramsden, "more advanced than ever he was," often betrays his fundamental incapacity for logical thought. Thus in one place he ranks William Morris along with Goethe, Schopenhauer and Ibsen and others as "among the writers whose peculiar sense of the world I recognise as more or less akin to my own." In another place he praises Sir Henry Irving for introducing the Pre-Raphaelite movement on the stage in *King Arthur*, and declares that "Morris and Burne-Jones, close friends and co-operators in many a masterpiece, form the highest aristocracy of English art to-day." But Morris's works consist of nothing but a long succession of the day-dreams of which, when they occur in Ross-cullen, Mr Shaw writes fiercely: "Oh, the dreaming! the dreaming! the torturing, heart-scalding, never-satisfying dreaming, dreaming, dreaming, dreaming! No debauchery that ever coarsened and brutalised an Englishman can take the worth and

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usefulness out of him like that dreaming." And, indeed, the greater part of the Pre-Raphaelite movement was nothing but a vast organised day-dream, an attempt to play at living in a world other than that in which we do live. There is a similar muddle-headedness when Mr Shaw writes a long preface ridiculing modern medicine and, in particular, inoculation against disease, and then follows it up with a play turning on the point that a doctor has discovered an infallible inoculation-cure for consumption.

But most of Mr Shaw's argumentative muddles are of a more subtle kind than this, and an unsympathetic observer has given them the generic title of "The Non Sequitur ; or Shavian Method of Reasoning." Let us take one of them as an example of all. In the preface to *Heartbreak House* Mr Shaw is arguing his old thesis that the theatre is a more edifying and less sensuous place than the Church ; and he concludes with the declaration that, " in point of appeal to the senses, no theatre ever built could touch the

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fane at Rheims ; no actress could rival its Virgin in beauty, nor any operatic tenor look otherwise than a fool beside its David." This is an almost startlingly typical debating point. Mr Shaw is arguing, not for the truth, but in order to bring to the light an unemphasised aspect of the truth ; and his concern is simply to make his audience sit up and become receptive to the general impression he desires to produce. One of his ways of doing this is to use a plausible confusion of ideas ; for it takes a moment or two (which Mr Shaw's driving manner does not allow to his readers) to remember that the sensuous appeal of the David is to the eye and the sensuous appeal of the operatic tenor to the ear. One is reminded of the story of Samuel Butler (one of Mr Shaw's favourites), who, when his tobacconist maintained that Mr Gladstone was a great financier, invented a story about Mr Gladstone's private life which showed him as a financial bungler : Butler was determined, he said, that, knowing his contention was

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true, he would prove it to the tobacconist in a way the tobacconist could understand. Mr Shaw, fanatically convinced that the main lines of his case are accurate, is determined, by whatever means, to induce in his audience a mood of agreement, however bewildered and reluctant.

It is this conviction which lies at the heart of his controversial writing and makes it valuable in spite of the intellectually dishonest methods of the surface. These methods are, at all events, never used to support the conventional views which, right or not, are generally accepted ready-made without any effort of mind. The conviction induced by Mr Shaw's exercise of his debating powers is often instantaneous, but is rarely more than temporary ; and the ready plausibility which can obtain applause in a meeting or influence a vote in a debating society does not very frequently leave new permanent beliefs in the mind of a reader. But in this direction Mr Shaw's intentions and gifts are more destructive than con-

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structive. When (following Samuel Butler) he exhibits a distrust of family affection in the preface to *Misalliance*, when in the preface to *O'Flaherty, V.C.*, he says: "No one will ever know how many men joined the army in 1914 and 1915 to escape from tyrants and taskmasters, termagants and shrews, none of whom are any the less irksome when they happen by ill luck to be our fathers, our mothers, our wives and our children"—when he takes this attitude he does not expect his readers to throw over the old convention of the family which they blindly held and adopt instead no less blindly his new formula. He means merely to challenge a view too conventionally held, to provoke the ordinary man into asking himself how far his view of the world corresponds with reality. Nine-tenths of the ideas of nine-tenths of all men are accepted ready-made; and ready-made ideas are like ready-made clothes: they fit where they touch, but they are cheap.

The whole of Mr Shaw's life has been one

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long tilting against this complacent acceptance ; and therefore the controversial Shaw, though his guidance is hardly to be followed in medicine, in politics or in domestic affairs, is a real part of the man. His controversial writing is excellent of its kind. He has much the same opinion of style as had Samuel Butler : that it is the same as a straight line—the shortest distance between two given points. Therefore he uses no tricks and no luxuries in the handling of words. He has no sensuous images to convey, only propositions ; therefore there is no vagueness in his writing, which is as straightforward as an official report and generally much more correctly composed. But he has the debater's power of moving briskly and nimbly from point to point and the debater's power of making every sentence interesting. No doubt his prefaces on Home Rule and the Censorship and the rest will in time cease to be read. Few of us, whatever we may pretend, now read Swift's historical pamphlets. Their sole object is to state

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propositions which have now ceased to concern us. But if by accident one dips into them it is hard not to go on reading in sheer admiration of the intellectual power displayed in the stating of these propositions. So with Mr Shaw. Even now the actuality of some of his prefaces and of his famous pamphlet on the war has begun to fade ; but it is still possible to admire and enjoy them, as one admires and enjoys the perfect working of a machine, without thinking of the purpose to which it is being put.

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I HAVE said that Mr Shaw's influence is mainly destructive and that is no less true of his philosophy than of his controversial writing on topical questions. But no man could be merely destructive and still put so much heart into the work. He has a faith ; he is ready to tell you what you must do to save your soul and also what is the purpose of life. In a preface to *The Irrational Knot* he concludes thus :

“ Since writing the above I have looked through the proof-sheets of this book and found, with some access of respect for my youth, that it is a fiction of the first order. By this I do not mean that it is a masterpiece in that order, or even a pleasant example of it, but simply that, such as it is, it is one of those fictions in which the morality

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is original and not ready-made. Now this quality is the true diagnostic of the first order in literature, and indeed in all the arts, including the art of life. . . . No man who shuts his eyes and opens his mouth when religion and morality are offered to him on a long spoon can share the same Parnassian bench with those who make an original contribution to religion and morality, were it only a criticism."

An original morality is what Mr Shaw demands in the first place, and to him any original morality is better than none ; that is why he is mainly destructive. Before he can preach his own doctrine he must make away with the persons who present to him ideas that are not their own, parrot-like repeated, which have no connection with their desires and often very little with their actions. In this demand he has been consistent from the beginning of his career up to now. Susanna and Ned Conolly, in *The Irrational Knot*, make their own moralities for themselves. Susanna goes to live with

Marmaduke Lind without marrying him ; she is not sure that to incur the legal tie is a safe enterprise and she acts in consonance with the dictates of her own nature, sure she is acting wisely and caring nothing that others may think her conduct shameful. Ned respects his wife for leaving him for another man, but despises her for thinking herself wicked. The instances are crude. Mr Shaw was young when he imagined them, but he has never receded from that position. While he was criticising the theatre he wrote of "the idlest of all worlds, the world of dreams and books, so idle that people do not even learn to ride and shoot and sin in it." Some twenty years later, in the preface to *Fanny's First Play*, he wrote :

"Mere morality, or the substitution of custom for conscience, was once accounted a shameful and cynical thing : people talked of right and wrong, of honour and dishonour, of sin and grace, of salvation and damnation, not of morality and immorality. The word morality, if we met it in the Bible, would

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surprise us as much as the word telephone or motor-car. . . . Is it any wonder that I am driven to offer to young people in our suburbs the desperate advice : Do something that will get you into trouble ? But please do not suppose that I defend a state of things which makes such advice the best that can be given under the circumstances, or that I do not know how difficult it is to find out a way of getting into trouble that will combine loss of respectability with integrity of self-respect and reasonable consideration for other people's feelings and interests on every point except their dread of losing their own respectability. But when there's a will there's a way. I hate to see dead people walking about : it is unnatural. And our respectable middle-class people are all as dead as mutton. Out of the mouth of Mrs Knox I have pronounced on them the judgment of her God."

Mr Shaw's advice is, in short : " Do something. Let it be, if possible, a good thing ; if not, then it must be a bad thing. But do it.

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Do not dream, do not be idle ; and, above all, do not pretend that your shrinking from action is dictated by true morality."

Another English writer has preached a very similar doctrine :

"The counter our lovers staked was lost
As surely as if it were lawful coin :
And the sin I impute to each frustrate ghost
Was, the unlit lamp and the ungirt loin,
Though the end in sight was a crime. . . ."

It is, indeed, rather strange that Mr Shaw should not have named Robert Browning as one of the writers "whose peculiar sense of the world I recognise as more or less akin to my own" ; for a good deal of his work might have been written in illustration of this passage from *The Statue and the Bust*.

The doctrine is never far absent from his work, and one might find an example of it in almost every play he has composed. *Mrs Warren's Profession* begins by being a play about prostitution but it reaches its climax

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when Mrs Warren defends herself and Vivie exclaims in admiration : “ My dear mother, you are a wonderful woman — you are stronger than all England.” She and her sister found themselves in an intolerable condition of poverty and took the best way out of it, bad though that was : their half-sisters, not having the vitality to rebel and to sin, “ undersized, ugly, starved-looking, hard-working, honest, poor creatures,” went under in the end. The story of *Candida* is the story of the stripping away of conventional illusions. So, too, to some extent, but in a purely comic and good-humoured spirit, is the unmasking of Raina in *Arms and the Man*. Raina has lied and posed to everyone around her from her childhood up, but when Bluntschli brusquely accuses her of it she confesses and is rather pleased by the discovery. Her lies and poses have been the outcome of an excess of vitality rather than a device to cover a want of it ; and therefore her creator forgives her and deals tenderly with her.

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This was always the driving-force behind Mr Shaw's work. But, as I have said, with *Man and Superman* he became more definitely didactic ; and this and most of the plays which followed it have been deliberate expositions of his attitude to life. Let anyone who wishes to understand this read *Man and Superman*, *Major Barbara*, *The Shewing-up of Blanco Posnet*, *Fanny's First Play*, *Androcles and the Lion*, *Heart-break House* and *Back to Methuselah*. All these are in effect a glorification of life, of real life, pursued without the help of illusions or shams ; and they culminate in the declaration that if we are to make a proper use of life then we must live longer.

Let us take in succession the salient point of each. In the first play it is John Tanner's surrender to the demand made on him by the Life Force speaking through the lips of Ann Whitefield. In the second it is Andrew Undershaft's admonition : " Leave it to the poor to pretend that poverty is a blessing ; leave it to the coward to make a religion of

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his cowardice by preaching humility : we know better than that. We three must stand together above the common people : how else can we help their children to climb up beside us ? ” Undershaft’s gospel is the gospel of “ money and gunpowder ; freedom and power ; command of life and command of death.” In a bad world he will not be squeamish about the one way that lies open to him of making himself an independent and self-respecting man, for only in such does life flow at the proper pressure and prepare itself for new achievements. Blanco Posnet tried to be a bad man and did it rottenly ; but God touched him, or a sense of himself awoke within him ; and “ I got the rotten feel off me for a minute of my life, and I’ll go through fire to get it off me again.” He risked his life to save a child, not out of any sentimentality, but because he could not help it, because life must be preserved. In *Fanny’s First Play* Mrs Knox cries that “ with all our respectability and piety we’ve no real religion and no way of

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telling right from wrong. We've nothing but our habits, and when they're upset, where are we?" Androcles has two companions on the way to martyrdom. Lavinia says: "Do you think I am only running away from the terrors of life into the comfort of heaven? If there were no future, or if the future were one of torment, I should have to go just the same. The hand of God is upon me." But Spintho regards martyrdom as a definite if somewhat high price which he is paying in order that he may avoid the consequences of sins he has not really repented. *Heartbreak House* is what its name tells us, a house full of people with nothing to do, wretched in an impotence which springs from lack of vital impulse. And *Back to Methuselah* is, in a way, a summary of the belief which lies behind all these instances.

Mr Shaw has been so long and so commonly regarded as a sneerer, a Mephistophelean sceptic, that this revelation of him as a very earnest-minded hotgospeller may be a little

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startling. He is, in truth, a deeply religious man, and he has written of nothing so much as of religion. But he has suffered all his life under a handicap, which is that he is shy of using that word as he is shy of using the name of God, yet cannot find any proper substitutes for them. This gives his doctrine a rather arid and a rather cranky appearance and leads him into inconsistencies. Thus he inveighs against the use of the word morality ; but when John Tanner tells Ann that one day he found he had a soul and that veracity and honour were no longer goody-goody expressions in the mouth of grown-up people but compelling principles in himself—when he has said this, he explains that what he means is “the birth in me of moral passion ; and I declare that according to my experience moral passion is the only real passion.”

The inconsistency is not, indeed, one which cuts deep into Mr Shaw's system. It is only on the surface ; but a tight suit of clothes is only on the surface, yet may

hamper the movements of its wearer. The terms which Mr Shaw uses for the expression of his philosophy are a little tight for him and make him move awkwardly. It is awkward, for instance, to have to say "the Life Force" when you really mean "God." But Mr Shaw fears that if he talks about "God" he may be thought to have relapsed into the church-going "religion," which it was one of the first acts of his adolescence to repudiate. His Life Force is, to be sure, an unconscious force struggling for consciousness, very far from an omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent Deity. But God is that to which the religious instinct in man responds, and Mr Shaw's God is the Life Force. What are God's attributes is a matter for theological discussion, and very many theologians will disagree with Mr Shaw's definition of them. But the power he thus defines is to him what the Christian God is to a Christian, what the Mohammedan God is to a Mohammedan. We are all agreed that if there be in any objective sense a God

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at all, if the universe be not a soulless accident, then there is only one God, Whom men variously discern. It may well be that one discernment of Him is the right one, and that all the others, Mr Shaw's included, are misapprehensions. But it would be better for him and his readers if he should bring himself to admit his conception of God is that and nothing else, that it is a conception like the rest.

It would be better for his readers because his terminology has a repellent and inhuman effect ; it suggests that his religion has been intellectually manufactured out of the latest scientific discoveries, which are going to be overturned the day after tomorrow, and has no more validity than they temporarily give it. And the expressions a writer uses cannot but recoil on himself. His thoughts are not thoughts until they are expressed in words ; and to him, as to others, they must be what his words have made them. All this is, no doubt, the fault of the time in which Mr Shaw was born,

though his own natural contradictiousness, his desire to make people think, rather than to tell them what to think, has a great deal to do with it. Is it, then, unfair to inquire what might have become of him if he had been born in another time ? In *The Doctor's Dilemma* Louis Dubedat, that engaging character, proclaims that he is a disciple of Bernard Shaw, and Sir Patrick Cullen observes : " Mr Shaw ? I never heard of him. He's a Methodist preacher, I suppose." Whereupon Louis replies : " No, no. He's the most advanced man now living ; he isn't anything." And Sir Patrick rejoins : " I assure you, young man, my father learnt the doctrine of deliverance from sin from John Wesley's own lips before you or Mr Shaw were born. It was to be very popular as an excuse for putting sand in sugar and water in milk. You're a sound Methodist, my lad ; only you don't know it." But what would Mr Shaw have been if he had been a Methodist preacher or if he had had some similar opportunity ? Let me quote one

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passage from the preface to *Back to Methuselah*, where he discusses the Darwinian theory of the length of the giraffe's neck :

“ All the animals who happen to be an inch or so above the average will be better fed and stronger than the others. They will secure the strongest and tallest mates, and their progeny will survive, whilst the average ones and the sub-average ones will die out. This process, by which the species gains, say, an inch in reach, will repeat itself until the giraffe's neck is so long that he can always find food enough within his reach, at which point, of course, the selective process stops and the length of the giraffe's neck stops with it. Otherwise, he would grow until he could browse off the trees in the moon. And this, mark you, without the intervention of any stock-breeder, human or divine, and without will, purpose, design, or even consciousness beyond the blind will to satisfy hunger. It is true that this blind will, being in effect a will to live, gives away the whole case ; but still, as compared to

the open-eyed intelligent wanting and trying of Lamarck, the Darwinian process may be described as a chapter of accidents. As such, it seems simple, because you do not at first realise all that it involves. But when its whole significance dawns on you, your heart sinks into a heap of sand within you. There is a hideous fatalism about it, a ghastly and damnable reduction of beauty and intelligence, of strength and purpose, of honour and aspiration, to such casually picturesque changes as an avalanche may make in a mountain landscape, or a railway accident in a human figure. To call this Natural Selection is a blasphemy, possible to many for whom Nature is nothing but a casual aggregation of inert and dead matter, but eternally impossible to the spirits and souls of the righteous. If it be no blasphemy, but a truth of science, then the stars of heaven, the showers and dew, the winter and summer, the fire and heat, the mountains and hills, may no longer be called to exalt the Lord with us by praise: their work is to modify all things by blindly starving and

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murdering everything that is not lucky enough to survive in the universal struggle for hogwash."

Observe the argument. There are good, common-sensical reasons to be put forward against the Darwinian theory of the giraffe's neck, as Mr Shaw presents it ; but Mr Shaw does not rely on them. He says, in effect, that this theory "makes a goblin of the sun " and that he will have none of it.

The passage I have quoted is a profession of faith which does not depend on the data usually submitted for the decision of reason. Mr Shaw is here working on an intuition to which he is prepared to trust his life, or, at any rate, all that makes life, for him, worth living. It is a passage betraying in every sentence the dry, unsensuous mysticism which characterises reformers of religion. Mr Shaw was born in a time unfavourable to such men, but he cannot betray his natural temperament. He is, perhaps, a maimed and imperfect prophet. He is a

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prophet who has been compelled to put on something of the clown. He is a prophet who has been—if I may be allowed to emphasise a point which I think very important—induced to make use of a very unfortunate terminology. But his works, carefully considered, justify his white beard and his patriarchal aspect. Perhaps he may be, let us hope that he may be, the first of historical men to rival Methuselah.

POSTSCRIPT

SINCE this essay was written, I have been able to read Mr Shaw's new play, *Saint Joan*. He has written it, I imagine, as something of a recreation from *Back to Methuselah*. It is a story and a study in character ; as the first moving, and as the second more or less convincing. It contains nothing tendencious beyond one of those fatuously bull-headed Englishmen whom it so much pleases Mr Shaw to invent but

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who are, I believe, beginning to bore the English. When Mr Shaw's chaplain is made to say, "No Englishman is ever fairly beaten," then we begin to feel that Mr Shaw is repeating a joke which has not quite enough reality for so much repetition. For the rest, the play tells the story simply, vigorously and vividly ; and there is an ingenious last scene contrived to deliver the author's comment. But this piece does not make any serious difference to one's estimate of the whole of its author's work.

The production of *Back to Methuselah* on the stage seems to me to call for some further comment. It is the first play by Mr Shaw which, to make a purely personal confession, seemed to me much less interesting in the theatre than on the printed page. The performance brought out mercilessly those long wastes of trivialities which, in reading, one can skip. It did, however, by mere contrast between conception and execution emphasise the greatness and the

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sincerity of the conception. One may have been bored by the play : it left one more certain than ever that Mr Shaw is a serious man with a real philosophy, in which he believes with all his heart.

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